

# Reframing agency in complexity-sensitive peacebuilding

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## Abstract

This article examines how the growing complexity of peacebuilding settings is transforming the classic notion of purposeful agency into a non-purposeful, adaptive form of being in such contexts. Through an analysis of critical peacebuilding literature and a reflection on the UN's peacebuilding practices in the field, the article first argues that complexity has been gradually replacing linear, top-down strategies with approaches seeking to draw attention to interdependencies, relationality and uncertainty. The article then suggests that engaging with complexity has critical implications for the traditional understanding of purposeful agency in the peacebuilding milieu that go beyond those of the governmentality critique, which conceptualizes the complexity turn as a strategy for extending control over post-conflict societies. Complexity is eventually conceived of in the article as a performative contextual quality that stems from the non-linear, co-emergent and unpredictable entanglement of interactions between actors in peacebuilding processes. This state of entanglement hinders the autonomous, purposeful agential condition of these actors in war-torn scenarios – in this article, peacebuilding implementers specifically – in which agency seems more and more restricted to its adaptive nature.

## Keywords

Agency, complexity, governmentality, peacebuilding, relationality, United Nations

## Introduction

The use of complexity approaches to understand social phenomena has been a growing enterprise since the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Taylor, 2002). Based on the analysis of self-organized systems in the natural sciences, complexity has gained relevance in the social sciences owing to evidence of the growing interconnectedness of contemporary global challenges. As an analytical framework, complexity entails a sense of contingent openness and multiple futures, unpredictable outcomes in space-time, non-linear changes in relationships between living beings and objects – in sum, an emergent, dynamic and self-organizing entanglement of systems that influences the development of later events. In short, non-linear effects cannot be reduced to their individual components, as they are shaped by inter-component, uncertain relations (Urry, 2005: 3–5). From the effects of climate change, to refugee flows, to the protraction of poverty and armed conflict in

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specific areas of the globe, realities appear to be intractable and unthinkable in isolation. Such challenges illustrate the analytical suitability of complexity-sensitive frameworks that embrace the relations between actors and processes in the current troubled age as well as the often unintended and devastating effects emerging from the uncertain exchanges that underpin all relations (Harrison, 2006). The understanding of complexity employed in this article is accordingly twofold. First, complexity is conceived of as an analytical tool that enables us to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the behaviour of beings (actors) in the types of complex processes referred to above. Second, complexity is also conceptualized as a performative contextual quality that stems from the non-linear, co-emergent and unpredictable entanglement of interactions between beings in any given process.

Within the broad domain of social processes in which complexity is profoundly embedded, this article seeks to unveil how complexity has displaced the peacebuilding enterprise; namely, the endeavour to make sense of and engender durable peace in conflict-affected scenarios, both in theory and in policy. The article does this, first, through a revision of critical peacebuilding literature. In addition, through a discussion of policy documents and fieldwork research, the article then outlines the shift at the policy level by engaging with UN peacebuilding frameworks in selected field missions. The article argues that complexity has gradually replaced a linear, goal-oriented peacebuilding mindset with approaches that are increasingly sensitive to interdependencies and the uncertainty of the effects of the interactions between a varied range of actors. Increasingly, peacebuilding scholars and practitioners appear to engage with war-torn societies not as frames within which specific goals need to be reached, but as spaces wherein actors cope with uncertainty and adapt to new circumstances in a constructive and sustainable way. The article further suggests that engaging with complexity has critical implications for the traditional understanding of purposeful agency in the peacebuilding milieu that go beyond those of the governmentality critique, which conceptualizes the complexity turn as a strategy for extending control over post-conflict societies. Departing from most literature that seeks to engage with the agency of recipients of peacebuilding, this article eventually invokes re-engaging with the implementers of peacebuilding in order to unpack how complexity and the entangled interactions from which it stems unnoticeably render agency a non-purposeful, adaptive form of being in peacebuilding settings.

The article follows a qualitative methodological approach rooted in complexity thinking, seeking to engage with the case-study material to elicit an open-ended discussion about the principles, concepts and boundaries of peace thinking (see Law, 2004). This approach informs the formation of the research puzzle, but also affects the way in which the fieldwork and data material have been gathered and understood. The chosen qualitative mode of enquiry is based on an exploratory approach to discourses and narratives emerging from documents and interviews, which are in turn used to inform larger-scale analysis and theory around peacebuilding in such a way as to dislodge and question given conceptual categories. Here, data allow us to create a broader picture of the emergent challenges on the ground as well as the evolving agency of actors navigating these. The article is organized in four sections. The first section outlines the relevance of the concept of complexity as a way of framing a recent shift in critical peacebuilding literature. In a similar vein, the second section, informed by policy documents as well as interviews conducted with UN peacebuilding officers and civil society representatives involved in the missions deployed in Sierra Leone, Burundi and the Central African Republic (CAR), illustrates a policy shift towards complexity-sensitive field strategies. The third section examines how critical analyses of peacebuilding implementers in the context of growing complexity, such as those informed by governmentality studies, understand this shift in policy towards complexity-sensitive strategies as a further attempt to extend control over post-conflict societies. Seeking to move the debate on purposeful agency in peacebuilding settings forward, the final section unpacks how the ever-changing, entangled and uncertain

interactions between actors in conflict-affected milieus have profound effects on these actors' barely questioned agency that go beyond what is suggested by explanations that focus primarily on liberal intentionality. Complexity, it will be argued, renders agency non-purposeful and adaptive.

## Realizing complexity in critical peacebuilding literature

At the time of writing, the almost 30-year-old liberal peacebuilding project is considered to be in profound crisis (see Chandler, 2017). Peacebuilding theory of the past two decades has pointed to evidence suggesting that most contexts under the UN peacebuilding framework have stopped considerably short of the ends envisioned by peacebuilders. Many post-conflict territories have not been pacified, and, furthermore, violent outbreaks are (re)emerging in different parts of the world. Critiques now suggest that it is apparent that neither the highly top-down and technical state-building strategies from the late 1990s and early 2000s nor the more context-sensitive and locally focused engagements from the last decade have succeeded in delivering leadership of the peace process to local populations and establishing durable peace (see Kappler, 2012; Simangan, 2017).

Among the plethora of perspectives that have articulated extensive critiques of liberal peacebuilding missions during the past two decades, several have focused particularly on the implementers of peacebuilding, and specifically on international organizations like the UN (see Chesterman, 2004; Pouligny, 2006; Wilde, 2007). The analysis presented below centres specifically on perspectives that focus on the management of the complexity, intractability and interconnectedness of actors and processes in UN-led peacebuilding settings. In this article, we have chosen to focus particularly on the notion of complexity both to engage with the content of critiques of peacebuilding and to reflect on how the concept itself has resonated with changing strategies of adaptation by enactors of peacebuilding practices themselves. The notion of complexity is particularly relevant to recent assessments of peacebuilding in theory and practice both because it enables the outlining of those epistemological and ontological conditions that come to determine the reality of the post-conflict milieu and because it unravels peacebuilders' challenges by unpacking the limitations of linear planning for peacebuilding engagement. In this sense, complexity is defined not only as an analytical tool that enables us to 'investigate emergent, dynamic and self-organizing systems that interact in ways that heavily influence the probabilities of later events' (Urry, 2005: 5), but also as a contextual quality rooted in the chaotic entwinement of actors and processes. Complexity is tightly linked to the emergence and immanence of those non-linear effects that cannot be reduced to individual components or micro-dynamics (Körppen, 2013) and that have been offered as explanatory factors for understanding phenomena that interfere with liberal peacebuilding agendas, such as resistance by local actors. Therefore, complexity accounts for the uncertain interactions between the components of a system that eventually develop into system-wide patterns (Burns, 2011).

The importance for peacebuilding of recognizing complexity is particularly embedded within the wider critique of modernist and liberal approaches to peacebuilding mentioned above. Though this critique has been largely examined elsewhere (Bargués-Pedreny, 2015; Randazzo, 2016), and though critiques substantially differ in focus and methodology, the underlying concern running across these perspectives relates to the necessity of acknowledging the impossibility of reducing the complex sociopolitical dynamics of post-conflict milieus to a generic 'local' (see Hirblinger and Simons, 2015). The failure to do so, critics suggest, is what has contributed to the numerous failures of peacebuilding. Complexity, then, becomes a tool for critiquing simplistic peacebuilding praxis as well as for conceptually outlining what makes top-down peacebuilding unsuitable for its own given aims of restoring peace to war-torn societies. As a whole, the bid to reflect on the complexity of societies emerging from conflict is one that is consistent with the wider attempt to

engage more directly with the subjects of peacebuilding and, more specifically, in so doing, to 'facilitate a more realistic (i.e. closer to the reality of how the social world works) and open approach to analysis and action for change' (Hendrick, 2009: 4).

The concept of complexity is therefore used in several ways, particularly by critical peacebuilding scholars, to articulate this analysis. Some, for example, use it to point to the limitations of the linear process tracing that is typical of peacebuilders' diagnostic approach to conflict resolution (De Coning, 2018: 302). De Coning (2018: 303), for instance, uses the concept of complexity to point to a shift in how peacebuilding processes are seen – from something that is 'programmatically' to something that is 'essentially political'. Here, the study of complex relational systems can shed light on how social systems respond to a variety of inputs, from the pressures of societal unrest to the involvement of external actors (De Coning, 2018: 305). Others rely on the concept of complexity to outline the resources available to agents involved in rebuilding societies after war. As Schwartz and Nichols (2010: 10) point out, regenerated societies do not 'reinvent the wheel', and analysis of the creation of complex societies sheds light on processes that ensure the survival of pre-existing institutions that bleed into what these authors call 'second-generation states'. While one of the characteristics of complex systems is, arguably, the innate unpredictability of processes that makes it impossible for actors to identify general principles on the basis of which to affect the system, it is also this unpredictability that can help to shed light on processes of 'experimentation and feedback' (De Coning, 2018: 305) that give rise to adaptive qualities that we often associate with the endurance of certain social or political orders.

These critical engagements with the concept of complexity are, to a large extent, informed by complexity theory debates. While some are only loosely informed by such theories (Moe, 2015; Tamminen, 2016), others contribute actively to theory-building for peacebuilding along the lines of complexity theory (Brusset et al., 2016; Cilliers and Preiser, 2010; Geyer and Pickering, 2011) or rely on peacebuilding empirics to contribute to new conceptualizations of complexity theory itself (Coleman, 2006). While there is no singular theory of complexity, but rather an assemblage of different approaches to complex systems, the perspectives engaged with in this article share a common interest in using the unpredictable nature of the outcomes of social processes as a starting point for continuous processes of experimentation and readjustment.<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the natural sciences, 'complexity theory' is one of several approaches that systematically address what a more organic engagement with the sociopolitical processes that we identify as post-conflict reconstruction and recovery may look like.<sup>2</sup> At its core, this strand of complexity theory applied to human communities reflects a fundamental scepticism towards universality, generalizability and predictability; yet, on the other hand, it is also suspicious of the abstraction typical of certain postmodernist approaches that focus primarily on the role of linguistic constructions (Kavalski, 2007: 449). In other words, while many critics of peacebuilding consider 'unintended consequences' as an outcome of processes of peacebuilding, of the encounter between the international and the local, and of endogenous processes of reconciliation after war, complexity is used to push the envelope by enabling reflection on what these unintended consequences can tell us about the complex processes that birthed them. Complexity can therefore be deployed as an explanatory tool to critique liberal peacebuilding, one that does not rely on linear reasoning to sustain its analysis of social reality, and that also does not reduce interactions to human components. Rather, complexity examines the context as a self-organizing whole that encapsulates actors' interactions as they evolve through contact with the environment within which they are situated and from which they emerge (Lemke, 1993).

In sum, the focus on complexity in the context of the analysis of peacebuilding is, at its core, used to describe and engage with real, messy and fluid local processes (Torrent, 2019; Visoka, 2016), without relying on abstraction or linear cause-and-effect logics (Vimalarajah and Nadarajah,

2013). In this sense, the concept contributes to the debate on a more ontologically significant state of interconnected emergence that has been recently acknowledged in the social sciences (Coole and Frost, 2010; Cudworth and Hobden, 2015; De Vries and Rosenow, 2015; Delanda, 2016) and has brought about the end of linear peacebuilding as we knew it (not only the top-down but also the locally focused bottom-up variety). If the limits of liberal peacebuilding have become painfully clear to scholars engaging with its theoretical logic, the embracing of the rhetoric of complexity has also become evident at policy level. Below, then, the article turns to examining how UN peacebuilding engagements seem to be gradually operationalizing complexity-sensitive strategies in conflict-affected societies.

## **Peacebuilding in practice: The UN towards a complexity-sensitive approach**

In line with the abandoning of linear causality and modern problem-solving logics at the theory level described above, world-renowned institutions seem to be gradually acknowledging the unreachability of social processes, developing practices increasingly more sensitive to the complexity of relations between a wide range of actors in societies in which interventions have been conducted.<sup>3</sup> This section draws on policy documents and fieldwork interviews conducted with UN peacebuilding officers and local civil society members involved in the cases of Sierra Leone, Burundi and the CAR in order to illustrate this shift in the policy domain.<sup>4</sup> These three particular instances are critical in relation to the implementation of peacebuilding practices as the three countries have simultaneously hosted missions by the two UN bodies most notoriously responsible for carrying out peacebuilding operations: the Department of Political Affairs and the Peacebuilding Commission. The focus on the United Nations stems from its 25-year role in leading the operationalization of international peacebuilding. Notably, the semi-structured interviews included here are not intended to be viewed as ethnographic research, nor can they provide a substantive and comprehensive overview of complex peacebuilding. Instead, they enable us to embrace a complexity-sensitive approach that allows data to illustrate some of the many emergent developments on the ground. The interviews themselves are useful for capturing the changing dynamics of complex peacebuilding cases, and observations made by interviewees enable us to more widely ‘explore issues related to causality and emergence in a complex case study’ (Hetherington, 2013: 78).

Unsurprisingly, the UN, through its peacebuilding architecture, has come to take the lead in the operationalization of strategies aimed at overcoming the root causes of conflict and thus securing lasting peace. In the current context of multidimensional missions, the UN System Chief Executives Board for Coordination recently stated that coherence among actors in the UN system in the areas of peace, security, human rights and development represents a milestone in the process towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and is aimed at achieving effective responses to emerging complex situations, ensuring durable peace (see Chief Executives Board for Coordination, 2016). The challenges posed by complexity to the UN’s ability to manage an increasingly complex field reality become evident in the words of the following two peacebuilding stakeholders involved in administering peace at various levels. In the first instance, the head of a Freetown-based peacebuilding-oriented NGO reveals how complexity is the result of factors exogenous to the UN, referring to the lack of clarity that stakeholders often have to navigate:

We have so many civil society organizations, so the UN is so confused who to deal with . . . Civil society is fragmented; we do not have that unified body through which we could channel national issues such as peacebuilding, governance, health, etc. . . . So the UN don’t know who to target. Definitely they are okay with our individual diversity, with our work – they are working with us, they are building our capacity; but,

honestly, when it comes to national issues, the UN is very sceptical, very much afraid of which organization to deal with. (Interview 3)

Furthermore, a policymaker with expertise on the UN peacebuilding involvement in Burundi also illustrates how complexity has permeated the UN's internal organizational structure, pushing it to articulate multidimensional peace operations to address increasingly complex field demands:

There was a problem in the beginning when it became a multilateral peace operation, when BINUB [the UN Integrated Office in Burundi] arrived. Because, then, all these heads of BINUB had five different hats. I don't remember all of them. It was like one person in several different roles. And there were still turf battles under the same headings, so they did not really diminish the turf battle, at least in the beginning. (Interview 2)

These insights are significant as they exemplify the UN's increasing awareness of the ever-mounting complexity of the post-conflict milieu and the impact that this has on the organization's ability to implement items on its agendas. Notably, despite over two decades of UN peacebuilding efforts, results continue to be questioned (Torrent, 2019). What is more, as a former Bangui-based officer from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) expressed in an interview, UN intra-coordination in the peacebuilding domain remains a 'nightmare' (Interview 1), even in the face of the organization's attempts to respond to the challenges of complexity.

Yet, it can also be suggested that the implications of the limited results in achieving peacebuilding goals in the face of complexity go substantially beyond the issue of organizational efficacy. These are, in fact, directly relevant to understanding the manner in which peacebuilding actors such as the UN have shifted towards acting on the basis of a complexity-sensitive strategy,<sup>5</sup> along with the effect this has had on our understanding of the agency of peacebuilding actors, as will be discussed below. Crucially, the UN peacebuilding apparatus seems to be gradually internalizing new operational frameworks to meet the complexity, vagueness, uncertainty and non-linearity of developments in conflict-affected societies. The report 'The Challenge of Sustaining Peace', developed by the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture on the latter's tenth anniversary, is illustrative of the manner in which this shift has been both conceptualized and operationalized in the face of the growing complexity of conflicts:

After two decades of steady decline, major civil conflicts are once more on the rise. Worse, those conflicts have become more complex, increasingly fragmented and intractable . . . A broader, comprehensive approach of 'sustaining peace' is called for, all along the arc leading from conflict prevention (on which, in particular, the UN system needs to place much greater emphasis), through peacemaking and peacekeeping, and on to post-conflict recovery and reconstruction. (Advisory Group of Experts, 2015: 7–8)

In an analysis of this report, De Coning (2016) argues that the UN's approach to sustaining peace is based on three concepts: *holism* – that is, the idea that a system cannot be understood in terms of its component parts alone but rather must be viewed as a whole; *non-linearity* – the fact that causal patterns of interactions in a given context are non-linear; and *self-organization* – the ability of a system to organize, regulate and maintain itself. Holism reflects the lack of isolation of beings in conflict-affected processes and the relevance of becoming sensitive to overarching messy interactions. In its report, the Advisory Group of Experts (2015: 12) states that 'improving UN performance in sustaining peace is truly a systemic challenge, one that goes far beyond the limited scope of the entities created in 2005 that have been labelled the "Peacebuilding Architecture"'. As a

result, the UN would not tackle war-torn contexts through separate departments, but rather through an organization-wide strategy towards sustainable peace. A closer examination of UN involvement in the CAR exemplifies this trend. In April 2014, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations deployed MINUSCA, established owing to worsening security conditions in the country. This mission absorbed not only the Department of Political Affairs-led United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic (BINUCA) but also non-UN engagements such as the African Union-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA) and France's Operation Sangaris. Through Resolution 2149, the UN Security Council established MINUSCA as a multidimensional peacekeeping operation aimed at protecting civilians, supporting the implementation of the transition process, facilitating humanitarian assistance, protecting UN personnel, promoting human rights, supporting national and international justice, and supporting the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.<sup>6</sup> MINUSCA therefore appears to be merging multiple peacebuilding dimensions in one single pole of operations, thus illustrating a form of system-wide, holistic engagement. Resonating with such an interpretation, a former MINUSCA officer stated during an interview that the integration of missions facilitates the operationalization of a synergistic strategy that seeks to encompass political as well as security challenges (Interview 1). Juncos (2018) elaborates on the UN 'integrated mission' concept by arguing that this type of mission has also shaped the understanding of comprehensive security in the frame of other international organizations such as the EU and NATO, which increasingly seek to achieve coherence between a wide range of actors in diverse domains such as humanitarianism, development, security, migration issues or counter-terrorism.

Additionally, the UN's current approach also seems to reify the trend identified by De Coning (2016) as 'non-linear temporality'. This can be seen in the attempt to abandon the strategy of assigning singular temporal phases to individual departments. Whereas the former conflict management approach was embodied in a formal rhetorical differentiation of strategies between conflict prevention action before the conflict ends, peacekeeping and peace-enforcement missions during ongoing conflict, and peacebuilding in the aftermath of violence, as well as the departmental compartmentalization of tasks,<sup>7</sup> sustaining peace seems to open up the possibility for an ongoing systemic and non-linear engagement without strict objectives or deadlines. In practice, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has pointed out on different occasions, the sustaining peace approach unveils the possibility of major organizational reforms, such as the possibility of merging the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, traditionally associated with the mitigation of ongoing violence, and the Department of Political Affairs, which is mostly in charge of conflict prevention and post-conflict missions (see Advisory Group of Experts, 2015). Building on this last argument, Zanotti (2010) presents the UN's sustaining peace approach as the result of a reflection on the interactions between a complex network of interdependencies that includes local, governmental, regional and international actors. Thus, sustaining peace seems to emerge from the questioning of whether the linear problem-solving approach is the right way to establish durable peace.

In sum, alongside critical theoretical debates, the adoption of complexity-sensitive field programmes appears to be gradually settling down in UN policy frameworks. Declaring the end of linear peacebuilding and the shift towards complexity, however, may not be sufficient to understand the implications for future developments in peace theory and practice. The next section examines how critical analyses of the agency of peacebuilding implementers in the context of growing complexity, such as those informed by governmentality studies, reduce complexity-sensitive strategies to a further endeavour by peacebuilders to extend their control over post-conflict societies. The final section will go beyond that critique to suggest that complexity in peacebuilding scenarios can enable a deeper questioning of the purposefulness of external actors and shed light on non-purposeful, adaptive agency.

## Examining complexity in peacebuilding: The limits of the governmentality critique

Taken as a whole, the larger complexity-sensitive shift within peacebuilding examined so far raises a number of questions. In particular, the emergence of policies based on a coherent management of complex interdependencies and ongoing adaptation rather than problem-solving, as outlined above, has been understood by some as evidence of a lasting – if sharpened – governmentality effort. This section will focus on outlining the way in which the complexity turn in policy has been understood within governmentality critiques, before suggesting that such critique is limited in terms of its identification of the driving force behind the complexity turn in the peacebuilding enterprise, at both theory and policy levels. The section will finally suggest that a deeper examination of agency is necessary to step beyond governmentality's emphasis on societal control, before the article goes on to discuss, in the last section, how complexity as a performative contextual quality can enable such a shift towards a nuanced understanding of agency in peacebuilding.

Debates concerning the move from top-down policies of transformation to decentralized approaches informed by the principle of adaptation to complex scenarios have questioned the motivations and driving rationale behind this shift. In particular, scholars have focused primarily on policies for disaster relief and management that have been framed under the auspices of non-linear resilience-building. Influenced particularly – though not exclusively – by Michel Foucault's conceptualization of liberal governmentality, scholars such as Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, Jonathan Joseph, Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, and Michael Merlingen have suggested that attempts to amend interventionary practices remain framed within a fundamentally unchanged will to control the conditions of uncertainty that give rise to perceived abnormalities or social phenomena to be normalized. For Dillon and Reid (2000: 136), neoliberal governmentality concerns the 'strategic ordering of power relations'; though, in the past, liberal governmentality operated primarily on the basis of the establishment of a state of emergency, they suggest that contemporary global liberal governance bases itself on conceptualizing emergency as a continuous state of emergence, characteristic of network societies and complex-adaptive systems. Similarly, for Walker and Cooper (2011: 157), the current approach to disaster and risk management exemplifies an attempt to deploy the concept of complexity in order to 'internalize and neutralize all external challenges . . . transforming perturbation into an endogenous feature of the system and a catalyst to further self-differentiation'; in other words, they suggest, this frames responses to complex crises as not merely about coping strategies, but also as the totality of 'means through which economic and social resilience is to be achieved' (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 155). These responses, Joseph suggests, do not operate on the basis of a logic of coercion, but rather through 'persuasion' and 'enablement'; as he puts it, 'this is a governmentality that works from a distance through policy suggestion backed up with a complex array of techniques of monitoring and assessment' (Joseph, 2014: 289). Here, the celebration of complexity appears central both to the framing of the solutions (i.e. the regimen of means designed to monitor and respond to crises) and to the understanding of the crises themselves, which are seen as emerging from interactions within 'complex systems' (Joseph, 2014: 286).

Thus, for this line of reasoning, the choice to address complexity through actions that include, among other things, the promotion of community resilience is framed as evidence that complexity is not treated as a condition of reality by policy implementers such as peacebuilders; rather, it is understood as a key for unlocking better outcomes through refined policymaking techniques focused on framing risks as endogenous to all complex interactions – and thus unavoidable (Walker and Cooper, 2011) – and on governing insecurities 'at a distance' (Joseph, 2014: 286). Where the will to govern directly is replaced by attempts to frame engagement and interventions as adaptation and 'accommodation of interests' (Merlingen, 2011: 156), this shift is said to conceal an unchanged



problematization of populations said to be at risk. In the context of security reforms, Merlingen (2011: 159) suggests that despite an apparent decentralization of governance inherent in the move towards learning and adaptation, governing at a distance through, for instance, the establishment of fact-finding missions in unstable, conflict and post-conflict settings can ‘categorize, organize, position and differentiate the subjects, objects and spaces to be governed’. Far from simply recording data observed as emerging from complex realities, then, policymakers, experts and implementers deploy ‘contingent and contestable premises and discursive filters in order to construct countries as problem-spaces in need of the particular brand of security’ (Merlingen, 2011: 157).

While it is not the objective of this article to entirely dispel those critiques raised towards the international peacebuilding enterprise that identify governmentality as a logic that sees complexity as an instrumentalized concept for achieving *better* peacebuilding, we argue that such an understanding tells only a partial story about agency in peacebuilding, one that sees it as purposeful and intentional when describing the actions of agents of liberal governmentality. Policies designed and implemented by peacebuilders, while seeming to be expressions of liberal governmentality, do not necessarily have to be understood as uniquely and purposefully so. Moreover, although the governmentality positions examined above are a far cry from the top-down interventionist approaches typically associated with peacebuilding, it is possible to argue that their conceptualization of the effects of complex dynamics on the agency of peacebuilders implies the persistence of linearly understood goals, tied to the peacebuilding actors by the purposeful exercise of agency towards these pre-established goals. Thus, complexity comes to be understood as an impediment, an externality to be managed, rather than an element that is constitutive of the nature of all agents. In addition, where analyses question a purposeful agency, this is primarily conceptualized through reflections on the emergence of unscripted and hidden forms of agency coming from the recipients of peacebuilding – particularly through the emergence of resistance (Mac Ginty, 2017; Mitchell and Kelly, 2011; Pogodda and Richmond, 2015).

Instead, we suggest that a complexity-sensitive analysis questions the view of peacebuilding actors as merely acting to teleologically pursue the establishment of liberal democracy in a context of complexity. Rather, we argue that these agents, immersed in complexity, readapt in ways that are constrained by their spontaneous interactions with others as, in complex social and political interactions, forms of agency that are at play both react to and enable the ontological complexity that is embedded in their relations. Hence, as described above, complexity is performative to the extent that, in these interactions with other agents and the environment, actors would then unexpectedly and unintentionally reproduce and contribute to the very complexity they observe. To be sure, prejudging peacebuilders such as the UN as purposeful agents seeking to manage, instrumentalize and control complexity from the outside may in fact contribute to a form of categorization that would, on the one hand, place actors and processes in the peacebuilding context into distinct groupings and, on the other, also assign hierarchies that may come to reinforce linear assumptions about power and resistance. Not only are such categories not always manifested in the same material manner across all post-conflict milieus, but, arguably, the uncritical acceptance of these categories could also presume that the undoing of such power relations might simply be a matter of reversing top-down approaches and replacing them with bottom-up ones.

We therefore argue that the focus on linear-thinking, teleological narratives – such as that exhibited by those critiques that seek to identify societal control as the key explanatory factor behind peacebuilding – does not sufficiently allow for an engagement with the complexity of the context, or with the entangled encounters and processes that actors face in conflict-affected scenarios, or, finally, with the substance of agency itself. Instead, as we unpack in the next section, ever-changing, co-emergent and uncertain interactions between actors have profound effects on their barely questioned purposeful agency in conflict-affected milieus.

## Rethinking agency within complexity-sensitive peacebuilding

Where governmentality explanations focus on tracing the driving rationale behind peacebuilding missions through the logics of an ultimate goal of societal control, the following complexity-sensitive analysis seeks to enable an engagement with the plethora of ways in which actors do not always necessarily pursue goals in a linear form, but often compromise with, fold to or co-opt elements of the other actors with whom they unpredictably interact and relate. Here, complexity helps us to see agents engaged in peacebuilding, such as the UN, as embroiled in uncertain, non-linear and entangled patterns of relations with other actors in a resulting increasingly complex scenario, the boundaries of which are constantly shifting and eluding categorization. As a result of this, rather than autonomous and purposeful agents with a telos and a goal to be reached, these peacebuilding actors appear to be better understood as being captured by constant and unfixed practices of non-determined transformation, reinvention and adaptation.

In order to unveil a more nuanced understanding of the transformation of agency as a result of this complexity in peacebuilding settings, we find it critical to reflect on the notion of relationality. As described above, complexity as a performative contextual quality of a given process stems from the uncertain and entangled interactions between beings (actors) and events in a particular process. Here, relationality can be helpful to illustrate not only the genesis of complexity, but also how the agential condition of actors is ultimately interrogated and compromised. Scholars of continental philosophy from the 20th century have elucidated relations between beings and events as constitutive parts of the same and of each other, meaning that relations precede the very existence of these beings and events (Haraway, 2016; Latour, 2005; Whitehead, [1929] 1985). Relationality provides a deeper understanding of the nesting of social processes, of the co-emergence and co-constitution of all elements in any given context, suggesting that actors, environments and social processes are all fundamental components of one another and that, as a result of this, the process of becoming of all beings is always tightly linked to their entangled relational condition.

This insight speaks to the transformative and boundary-blurring effect of a focus on processes rather than individual actors themselves. Increasingly, critical scholars of peacebuilding have illustrated the suitability of relationality as an analytical tool for enhancing understandings of the nature and dynamics of postwar contexts (Brigg, 2018; Chadwick et al., 2013; Joseph, 2018). Brigg (2018), for instance, defines relationality in peacebuilding settings as giving greater importance to relations than to entities by attending to the effects of interactions and exchanges. Similarly, Martin de Almagro (2018: 321) takes a relational account to mean a focus on the 'dynamic and ever-changing relationship amongst agents . . . who acquire meaning through and are constituted by their transactions, connections and relations with other actors'. In other words, in these perspectives, the focus is placed on the outcomes of non-linear transactions and entanglements between actors and processes to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of contemporary social phenomena, in which entanglements produce sharp and obvious unintended consequences, such as the 'local resistance' that critics of liberal peacebuilding have pointed to (Kappler, 2013; Mac Ginty, 2012; Richmond, 2012).

Nevertheless, it can also be suggested that while the focus of relationality is on undermining 'fixed endpoints, strategies and linear interventionary rationalities towards open-ended processes, non-linearity and adaptive tactics' (Moe, 2015: 103), it can also open up space for questioning not just the nature of the agency of the recipients of peacebuilding, which is nowadays widely accounted for, but also that of the implementers themselves. As Loode (2011: 73) suggests, it has become increasingly clear that acknowledging complexity means accepting that complex relations cannot be instrumentally modified to suit a pre-established goal, as 'even sophisticated peace and conflict impact assessment cannot guarantee that particular programs and projects will improve the

situation'. This insight thus enables a deeper questioning of notions of autonomy and purposefulness of agents in any social and political context (see Bennett, 2010).

To be sure, the question of agency in peacebuilding settings has not gone unaddressed (Mac Ginty, 2008). Although most critical peacebuilding literature associated with the 'local turn'<sup>8</sup> has primarily focused, as mentioned above, on articulating frameworks for interrogating the (often hidden or marginalized) agency of local actors, others have also sought to engage with the dynamics of the relationship between the local and the international, with particular emphasis on aspects related to the power asymmetries that characterize these encounters. Meera Sabaratnam (2011: 797), for instance, suggests that while critical approaches to peacebuilding employ the notion of a 'hybrid, post-liberal peace, centred on the "everyday"' as a way to re-centre attention on the informal agency of the 'local', this move also does little to unsettle 'particular assumptions about the centrality and coherence of Western agency and the necessity for Western engagement to bring peace in the non-liberal non-West'. Here local agency is seen as banal and depoliticized, a space occupied by custom and set in contrast to arenas where power operates (Sabaratnam, 2011). Vivienne Jabri similarly explores the ambiguous implications of the interactions and tensions between the interveners and the subjects of peacebuilding (see Jabri, 2012). From a postcolonial perspective, Jabri engages with the concept of 'hybrid agency', which is defined in terms of an international civil service at large that functions to service the peacebuilding agenda, blurs distinctions between the local and the international, and is driven by a policing rationality the imperative of which is the government of populations and spaces (Jabri, 2013). In Jabri's (2013: 14) account, agency is not merely distinguished in terms of local versus international, but is rather 'a complex network the nodes of which might shift from the here to the elsewhere . . . depending on circumstance, competency and all other elements seen to be necessary in an apparatus the remit of which is government'. For Jabri, the question of agency does not necessarily rely on dichotomies that clearly identify intervening actors as 'external', but rather qualifies them on the basis of their governing rationale. Indeed, the agency of peacebuilders speaks to a wider architecture of peacebuilding, a network enabling 'practices that view their target as populations to be governed' (Jabri, 2013: 6), where the agency of peacebuilders is set against that of the recipients of said rationality. The latter is then seen as the ensemble of 'practices that recognise these populations and their conflicts as distinctly political' (Jabri, 2013: 6).

Yet, despite casting light on the tangible and material manifestations of power imbalances in post-conflict settings, the reconceptualizations of agency articulated above still do not shed their reliance on governmentality-affected teleological narratives, nor do they entirely abandon categorizations and boundaries, which are employed to trace the contours of rationalities of social control and exploitation. For instance, while dispelling facile dichotomies between the local and the international, Jabri's conceptualization of agency continues to ground the latter in the imperative, governmentalizing and policing element that characterizes and delineates the actors seen as part of the peacebuilding architecture. This approach embraces international, transnational and local discourses and practices, and is qualified by its desire to enable further governance and constrain other forms of agency – which are the expression of wider forms of contested politics – in the process. Sabaratnam, too, questions the Western-centrism and Eurocentrism of critiques by pointing to where approaches – even critical ones – continue to narrate the story of neoliberal societal control, with the liberal West at its core and little regard for viewing 'the peoples targeted by interventions as political subjects' (Sabaratnam, 2013: 266). While this perspective nuances the analysis of the manner in which governmentality operates on its subjects, by disaggregating the global North from the global South it primarily favours questioning how critiques have contributed to 'Western distinctiveness [being] taken as an ontological "given"' (Sabaratnam, 2013: 270). Here, the author draws attention to how critical approaches contribute to the narrative of distinctiveness; what is not questioned, however, is the presence of a somewhat coherently identified – albeit

multifaceted – teleological project of ‘neo-colonial governance’ taking shape in what is identified as the ‘the circle in which intervention and its critics find themselves enclosed, with interventions themselves apparently softening their edges and filling the space through emphases on “local ownership”, “participatory governance”, multidimensional approaches to poverty reduction and political “partnership” with aid-recipient countries’ (Sabaratnam, 2013: 270).

Without disavowing these critiques, we attempt to move the conversation forward by hinting at the seemingly unnoticed effect that increasing entangled interactions between actors have in peacebuilding settings. Drawing on the above-described understanding of relationality in continental philosophy, we seek to suggest that the growing unpatterned relationality of beings in social realities makes it impossible to conceive of actors as solely purposeful agents acting autonomously in their pursuit of goals in a linear and teleological way. With the UN in mind, an adaptive form of agency can be understood as one that does not necessarily concern itself only with pursuing liberal goals, but one that is also fundamentally affected by its own relational nature. Crucially, this does not mean that actors do not possess normative goals, agendas or resources in a manner that is often unevenly distributed. Rather, their purposeful strategic goals are immanently and constantly trumped by an iterative complexity, rooted in uncertain relations, to the point of making the goals themselves vague, ever evolving and, very often, unreachable.

To be clear, this account of agency in complex conditions is not aimed at providing a power-blind account of relational processes on the ground, nor at bridging the local–international dichotomy in order to improve practice, as is arguably the case for De Coning’s (2018) ‘adaptive peacebuilding’. Instead, it seeks to lay emphasis on the effects of ungraspable interactions that blur the boundaries between actors and their rationalities. At the same time, being cognizant of the material aspect of these entanglements contributes to an understanding of how the structures of power wherein peacebuilding takes place are shaped, along with the behaviour pattern of actors themselves. Accordingly, complexity itself, through relationality, becomes a way of engaging with performative agency in a way that seeks to blur the ontological boundaries (rather than the descriptive ones) that are used to engage with actors and to offer a wider understanding of the menu of constitutive interactions available to them. In this regard, inter- and intra-actor relations can then be regarded as open-ended processes, constantly evolving on the basis of mounting entanglements. In other words, this approach to complexity can make it possible to re-engage with the agency of actors as it derives from the iterative processes seen beyond the phenomena that peacebuilding actors are reacting against, trying to manipulate or trying to find some leverage to emancipate themselves from (as though these existed outside themselves). This is an essential element of enabling an analytical reflection on the effects of complexity that goes beyond the recipients of peacebuilding alone. While it is beyond the scope of the present article to outline the practical implications of the complexity turn, it is important to note that the contribution of such an approach would lie particularly in its potential to offer a more relational scenario in which agents constitute each other under unpredictable and emergent exchanges.

In sum, the conceptual implications of re-engaging with the implementers of peacebuilding through a reading of complexity are clear. By deploying the concept of complexity beyond its common association with either the agency of resisting local actors or that of actors manipulated by intentional liberal governmental power, complexity tells us a rich story of actors affected by and affecting the very interdependencies they enact and experience. While the previous sections have elaborated on how complexity has affected peacebuilding theories and practices, as well as how the governmentality critique overlooks the challenges that purposeful agency faces in increasingly complex peacebuilding settings, this section has moved the debate on agency in peacebuilding forward by arguing that complexity can open up space for contesting narratives of purposefulness and enable the discussion to move towards a re-engagement with all agents in order to understand how complex scenarios affect and are enacted alike by implementers and recipients in interaction.

Indeed, it can ultimately be argued that this also has major policy-oriented implications for actors, such as the UN, that are currently seeking to focus on designing alternative practices and beliefs, more recently conceptualized by some scholars in the context of indigenous communities (see Devere et al., 2017). If complexity allows us to acknowledge the limits of knowing and affecting the world through purposeful action, this can usher in a position of epistemological uncertainty that ultimately disarms those actors who may have dogmatic and even manipulative tendencies.

## Conclusion

Peacebuilding scholars have increasingly sought to reflect on complexity, adaptiveness and relationality in order to focus on the agency of local agents, in line with normative emancipatory aims (Tom, 2013). In the past two decades, such engagement has been instrumental in enabling detailed analyses of the types of agency emerging in post-conflict settings, particularly among local actors reacting to, co-opting or resisting the policies, norms and ideas implemented and imported from the outside in (and from the top down). The implementers of peacebuilding have certainly not been marginalized in these critical accounts of peacebuilding, with critiques pointing out the tensions between illiberal means and liberal ends (Jabri, 2006; Jahn, 2007), between the forces of neoliberal governmentality and ‘the politics of conflict and contention [that] somehow disrupt and disturb the governmentalising imperative of peacebuilding’ (Jabri, 2013: 15), as well as the fundamentally problematic normative underpinnings of peace interventions, often informed by the imperial and colonial legacies of the Western states involved (Muggah, 2008; Richmond and Franks, 2008). Yet, we suggest, these accounts only tell a partial story with regard to the agency of the implementers of peacebuilding, which is often seen as determined by an unfazed will to control that imbues peacebuilding missions with telos and direction.

Indeed, hitherto efforts to reflect on the concept of complexity in peacebuilding have been limited in terms of enabling a reflection on what this concept can tell us about the agency of peacebuilding actors in post-conflict scenarios. What we suggest is to look at the growing entanglement of interactions between beings (actors) in order to provide a nuanced reconceptualization of the barely questioned purposefulness and autonomy of agency in these processes. More specifically, acknowledging how uncertain and messy relations between actors are co-constitutive of their very essence binds agency with this relational condition. Therefore, these actors cannot be imagined as purposeful entities that can autonomously and teleologically pursue linear goals. This insight enables us to frame spontaneous relations between actors as potential triggers for international organizations’ attempts to change their approach to engaging with the social realities of conflict-affected territories. As these actors come to realize the extent to which their co-constitutive entanglements with other actors assert the impossibility of autonomous cause–effect linear action, this realization, in turn, also affirms the non-reachability of early peace-affirming agendas and projects.

The example of the agency of UN peacebuilders, which is far from being purely intentional and teleological, is only a fragment of wider networks of actors and processes, reflecting a form of adaptiveness, identified here as relational in nature. Focusing on adaptiveness can be effective in enabling analyses of peacebuilding policies in a general sense, including both those that appear to be initially intentionally designed and those of a purely reactive, immanent and contingent nature. A complexity-sensitive analysis that focuses specifically on adaptiveness enables agency to take centre stage without the latter being prejudiced by the nature of the actor in question, albeit without forgoing issues of power imbalances. This approach thus captures complexity as a frame in which actors and processes are constrained by their non-linear, relational and co-constitutive condition. As a result, complexity-sensitive thinking has the potential to unpack the agential weakness of entangled actors, both peacebuilders and recipients alike, a weakness that seems surpassed only by the vagueness and unpredictability of developments in social realities.

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## Notes

1. It is worth noting that the complexity theory label writ large includes approaches that aim to predict outcomes through the use of computational power and big data. In these approaches, complexity is a defining quality of the field of study, but not necessarily a hindrance to planning and acting with purpose (see, for instance Liebovitch et al., 2019). Our article does not engage with these approaches, but focuses instead on frameworks for which complexity presents ontological as well as epistemological challenges to the notion of mastery of the social and the political; these perspectives are chosen since they feature prominently in peacebuilding literature, and also because they share foundational assumptions with many post-liberal frameworks of inquiry into peacebuilding theory.
2. Other approaches, also consistent with post-liberal frameworks, include emphasis on the iterative processes that shape the local context (see Björkdahl and Höglund, 2013; Richmond, 2009; Shinko, 2008; Tom, 2013; Visoka, 2012).
3. Besides the UN, widely developed in this section, other international agencies such as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU are also gradually shifting towards non-linear, complexity-sensitive policy frameworks (for the World Bank, see Hallegatte et al., 2016; for the OECD, see Mitchell, 2013; for the EU, see Juncos, 2018).
4. The fieldwork was conducted during two periods: from May to September 2016 in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and from December 2016 to April 2017 in New York City, USA. Experts on Burundi and the CAR were interviewed via Skype.
5. For further literature on the results of recent UN peacebuilding endeavours, see Campbell (2015), De Coning and Stamnes (2016) or Picciotto (2014).
6. For the text of Resolution 2149, see [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2149\(2014\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2149(2014)) (accessed 29 December 2019).
7. The Department of Political Affairs and the new peacebuilding architecture were tasked with conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support were tasked with peacekeeping and peace-enforcement competencies.
8. For a comprehensive overview of the local turn in peacebuilding, see Leonardsson and Rudd (2015).

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